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Sustainable Oil and Profitable Wind

The communication of corporate responsibilities as inverted positioning

Jochen Hoffmann & Maria E. Kristensen

Abstract

Companies are confronted with differing public perceptions, which influence the way in which they present their social and environmental responsibilities. Our qualitative study compares the online responsibility communication of two companies from the energy sector: Shell, representing the controversial but profitable oil industry; and Vestas, representing the sustainable wind industry, the financial competitiveness of which is sometimes called into question. The website analysis reveals that both companies engage in inverted positioning. They invert perceived weaknesses into strengths: Shell highlights its social and environmental responsibilities, whereas Vestas, instead of capitalising on its potential as a CSR brand, highlights its economic responsibility. Theoretically, we integrate inverted positioning into a constitutive process model of responsibility communication. Inverted positioning might lead either to a reputational downward spiral, making a company less credible in the longer term, or the public communication of contested responsibilities functions as a self-imposed ambition that can, over time, induce substantial corporate learning processes.

Keywords: aspirational talk, brownwashing, CCO – Communication Constitutes Organisations, controversial industries, corporate social responsibility, environmental communication

Introduction

A comprehensive treatment of self-presentation must deal with the complexities that arise when the audience already knows something about the self-presenter (Baumeister & Jones 1978: 608).

This insight from experimental psychology on individual impression management also sounds like a reasonable piece of advice for companies (Strahilevitz 2003). The communication of corporate responsibilities does not take its starting point from a *tabula rasa*, but can be understood as a (more or less appropriate) response to public presuppositions. Managerial research prefers to position Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as an independent variable: scholars are interested in the effects of CSR on corporate reputation and on profit in particular (Carroll & Shabana 2010; Gao & Bansal 2013;

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Jensen 2001; Lockett et al. 2006). It is less often analysed as a corporate response to public communication processes. Instead, many studies contribute implicitly to “the discursive construction of proactivity” (Zoller & Tener 2010: 391) in the field of CSR communication.

However, there is also an increasing interest in the CSR of controversial industries drawing attention to the question of how companies *respond* – or how they *should respond* to problematic pre-existing public images. They might aspire to *competitive positioning*, which would mean generally keeping quiet about CSR as perceived weakness, while highlighting strengths e.g. in the field of economic performance. Or are these companies nevertheless keen to engage in credible CSR communication? Conversely, the same question arises when looking at companies with a distinctly positive image as far as social and environmental responsibilities are concerned. They might highlight their competitive advantage in the field of CSR in order to distinguish their own business model from less responsible competitors. Or are there reasons “to *brownwash* by issuing communications to *understate* their environmental achievement”? (Kim & Lyon 2015: 706) *Competitive positioning* as the communication of a perceived *competitive advantage* (Porter 1985) appears at first glance like the most reasonable strategic response to pre-existing images. We call this into question and agree with Du, Bhattacharya & Sen (2007), who argue that “a more thorough contrast of specific positioning strategies awaits further investigation” (p. 237).

Our qualitative study contrasts the online responsibility communication of Royal Dutch Shell (hereafter: Shell) with that of Vestas. Both are active in the energy sector and both are global players, but Shell represents the extractive oil and gas industry, while Vestas constructs and sells wind turbines. The comparison of Shell as a controversial but profitable company, with Vestas as a potential CSR brand, which has been under financial pressure in the past, will allow us to identify different positioning strategies in their overall responsibility communications. Accordingly, the complete *triple bottom line* is brought into focus: *Profit, People, Planet* (Elkington 1997). We need to widen a narrow understanding of *corporate social responsibility* to encompass a broader understanding of *corporate responsibility*, which comprises not only the social and environmental, but also the economic dimension (Carroll 1991). We contribute both to empirical research and theoretical discussions of responsibility communication by asking: how do Shell and Vestas communicate corporate responsibilities on their websites, and how can differences be theoretically interpreted as responses to differing public perceptions?

Responsibility communication: Controversial industries and CSR brands

Controversial industries engage in practices and sell products that are publicly perceived to be inherently problematic in social and environmental terms. Examples listed by Cai, Jo & Pan (2012) include tobacco, gambling, alcohol, adult entertainment, weapons, nuclear products, oil, cement, and biotech. We agree with the authors when they state, “studies on the relation between such controversial industry sectors and CSR are in its infant stage and we do not fully understand why and how firms in controversial industries gain or sneak legitimacy through CSR engagement” (p. 468). However, in recent years in particular, there have been a few studies (Banerjee & Bonnefous 2011; Cai, Jo & Pan

2012; Du & Vieira Jr. 2012; Frynas 2005; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz 2006; Livesey 2002; Livesey & Kearins 2002; O'Connor & Gronewold 2012; Palazzo & Richter 2005; Slack 2012; Wheeler, Fabig & Boele 2002). Results appear to be counter-intuitive and show that controversial industries do not avoid CSR claims. On the contrary: they actively communicate social and environmental responsibilities. As far back as forty years ago, Fry & Hock (1976) concluded – in quite a provocative fashion: “Who claims corporate responsibility? The biggest and the worst.” Similarly, Ashforth & Gibbs (1990) argue that a low legitimacy organisation is typically an “overacting” actor who

“often makes claims that exceed what a high legitimacy organization would claim. Because management is sensitive and defensive about the organization’s credibility, it tends to grossly exaggerate its claims. Only in the totalitarian Soviet Union would a national newspaper be named ‘Truth’ (Pravda), or would leadership elections be proclaimed unanimous. Like intolerance, this braggadocio is also a sign of felt insecurity.” (p. 190)

Such insecurity might result from inconsistencies between public perceptions and self-perceptions. Individuals who believe that an audience’s critical perceptions are unjustified, insist on the opposite, instead of talking about strengths in other areas (Baumeister & Jones 1978). This also applies to those in management positions, especially in controversial industries (De Vries & Miller 1984). They tend to highlight social and environmental responsibilities instead of dissimulating them. In consequence, the idea of *competitive positioning*, where companies focus on perceived strengths instead of drawing attention to perceived weaknesses, is not supported by research on controversial industries. In these instances, we assume what we refer to as *inverted positioning*: companies criticised for a lack of social and environmental responsibilities tend to highlight their compliance with exactly those same responsibilities.

In consequence, we may also challenge *competitive positioning* as the preferred strategy of potential CSR brands. Again, it would appear to be common sense that companies in industries which allow them to position their CSR not just as an add-on, but as “part of the corporate DNA” (Waddock & Googins 2011: 30), ought to make use of this *competitive advantage* by differentiating themselves from other players on the market (Porter & Kramer 2006; Smith 2003). However, there is barely any research on corporate communication of (potential) CSR brands – even less than there is concerning the CSR of controversial industries. One of the few studies is presented by Du, Bhattacharya & Sen (2007), who, in their comparative analysis of three yoghurt brands, show the potential of a holistic approach to CSR. A popular “textbook” case is *The Body Shop*, which would appear to be a prime example of successful CSR branding. Livesey & Kearins (2002) describe how *The Body Shop* developed a distinct CSR brand by communicating a caring corporate identity with explicit political implications. However, there are also other voices: Strahilevitz (2003) concludes from experiments that “good corporate citizens” could neglect CSR communication, since there would be little room for further reputational improvement. Kim & Lyon (2015) argue that a significant CSR might even be downplayed, especially when companies face economic challenges. *Brownwashing* might be a reasonable corporate strategy during periods of low profits in order to alleviate concerns of shareholders worried about the costs of sustainable practices.

Overall, our literature review on corporate responses to positive or negative public perceptions of corporate responsibilities reveals instructive results, but also some research gaps:

- There are not many empirical and hardly any comparative studies positioning responsibility communication as a response to differing public perceptions. Increased interest in the CSR of controversial industries began only a few years ago. There is even less substantial research on CSR branding, even though it is a popular “best practice” teaching topic.
- There is a strange contradiction between common sense notions on *competitive positioning* as the communication of *competitive advantages* on the one hand and empirical evidence on the other. Some findings are mixed and some even point in the opposite direction: *inverted positioning* instead of *competitive positioning*.
- The field is dominated by under-theorised managerial literature, which tends to confuse prescriptive experimental research (What would be most effective for companies to do?) with descriptive research questions (What are companies doing?). This article remains on the level of a qualitative description and critical interpretation by comparing the actual online responsibility communication of two companies, Shell and Vestas. Potential societal consequences, which might, or might not, be in the corporate interest, are theoretically integrated into a communication process model.
- Often, the analysis of CSR communication strategies is not related to the communication of economic responsibilities. One exception is Livesey & Kearins (2002) who show how *The Body Shop* includes financial performance in their corporate commitments. They do not rely exclusively on a *competitive positioning* as a “caring” company: “For The Body Shop, the key identity issue was to stay recognizable as a ‘different’ kind of business *while succeeding in commercial terms*” (p. 252; emphasis added).

An economically responsible company responds to the expectation to be successful in financial terms. The communication of economic responsibilities might be prioritised or marginalised. It might or might not be related to the communication of social and environmental responsibilities (Banerjee & Bonnefous 2011; Humphreys & Brown 2008; O'Connor & Gronewold 2012). Functionalist business research (e.g., Cai, Jo & Pan 2012) tends to underestimate the complexity of these tensions by assuming a kind of natural win-win-relationship: being profitable and being a “good corporate citizen” are claimed to be mutually supportive. Public perceptions, however, may differ, and a contrasting research design looking at responsibility communication as a response to public perceptions needs to take this into account. It affects both the choice of cases and the methodology, which will be presented in the following section.

Methodology

Case selection

The interpretation of positioning strategies as a response to public perceptions requires a choice of companies where such attributions of responsibilities actually differ. We have chosen Shell and Vestas since both are global players and are engaged in energy, but Shell represents the oil and gas industry, whereas Vestas produces and sells wind turbines. Public perceptions in respect of these energy industries differ regarding social and environmental responsibilities on the one hand, and economic responsibilities on the other.

Oil and gas are subsumed to the controversial industries (Du & Vieira Jr. 2012) whose CSR activities are often perceived with suspicion (Frynas 2005; Vertigans 2013; Woolfson & Beck 2005). Slack (2012) argues that communication of social and environmental responsibilities within these industries “remains largely window dressing that serves a strategic purpose of mollifying public concerns about the inherently destructive nature of extractive industries operations” (p. 179). Shell is affected by that industry image and has experienced a long history of corporate scandals. This peaked in 1995: following massive public protests, Shell had to withdraw the planned deep-sea disposal of the oil platform *Brent Spar*. The company has also been accused of collaborating with Nigeria’s military regime in the execution of activists. Some argue that these crises induced a corporate learning process towards more social and environmental responsibility (Grolin 1998; Livesey & Kearins 2002). Nevertheless, critical perceptions persist (Frynas 2005; Vertigans 2013; Wheeler, Fabig & Boehle 2002; Woolfson & Beck 2005), and Shell continues to be at the receiving end of the activists’ wrath; current controversial issues include plans to drill in the Arctic. Not surprisingly, Shell is not listed as a reputable brand on CSR related dimensions (Corporate Knights 2015; Reputation Institute 2015b), even though it is ranked the 18th most valuable brand in the world (Brand Finance 2015). In terms of economic responsibility, we conclude that perceptions of Shell are primarily positive, while perceptions are predominantly critical where social and environmental responsibilities are concerned.

Potential CSR brands in the energy sectors include companies dealing with renewable resources. They stand for sustainability, are perceived to be providing the right response to climate change and, thus, represent a positive alternative to oil and gas. Vestas, a wind turbine manufacturer, benefits from the general societal acceptance of wind energy (Musall & Kuik 2011) and is perceived to be a reputable brand based on CSR dimensions, but does not score highly in terms of business performance (Reputation Institute 2015a). The “Green Industry” depends greatly on public and political support, and would be less competitive without massive state subsidies on various levels (Saidur, Islam, Rahim & Solangi 2010). Vestas has experienced some financial turbulence in recent years (Hansen 2015), which is why we conclude primary positive perceptions of their social and environmental responsibilities, but economic responsibilities are called into question.

Against this background, a comparison of the communication of corporate responsibilities by Shell and Vestas, respectively, becomes most instructive. Perceived strengths and weaknesses regarding social and environmental responsibilities on the one hand, and economic responsibilities on the other, differ. How do the companies respond? Do they engage in *competitive positioning* by highlighting perceived strengths and/or in *inverted positioning* by reinterpreting perceived weaknesses?

Qualitative website analysis

An analysis of corporate responsibility communication that not only includes social and environmental responsibilities, but also refers to economic responsibilities, requires the use of communication formats which are open to all of these dimensions. A CSR report, for example, focuses by definition on the communication of social and environmental responsibilities (e.g., Livesey 2002; Livesey & Kearins 2002), whereas an annual fi-

nancial report by its very nature highlights economic responsibilities. Accordingly, we need to choose texts where the company actually has a choice as to which responsibility dimension to prioritise over the others. We have chosen the general corporate websites, which have developed into one of the most important channels of responsibility communication (Capriotti 2011). Other texts, such as press releases, are less suitable for a comparative study, because they refer to different specific contexts, such as a crisis situation. Accordingly, we have chosen the introductory paragraphs on the main levels of the respective pages from the company websites (see Table 1, retrieved 24.11.2015). They are the first and most salient points of contact for anyone who wants to learn something about the self-understanding, claimed responsibilities, and identities of the organisation. Even though the labels both companies use for these sections on their websites differ in parts, there is a remarkable similarity in terms of the content structure, which facilitates a systematic comparison.

Table 1. *Selected webpages for the qualitative analysis of responsibility communication*

Shell	Vestas
Start page: www.shell.com	Start page: www.vestas.com
"About us"	"About"
"Who we are"	"Company profile"
"Our purpose"	"Vision" / "Mission"
"Our values"	"Values"
"Our strategy"	"Corporate strategy"
"Environment & Society"	"Sustainability"

The introductory statements on each page were selected.

Our in-depth content analysis identifies key terms, concepts, themes, metaphors, and arguments that form patterns in the texts and contribute to the positioning of the company. We will distinguish between two categories, namely key terms of a sustainability discourse referring to social and environmental responsibilities and/or key terms forming a business discourse referring to economic responsibilities with a strong market orientation. The extraction of communicative references to both discourses will allow us to identify which corporate responsibilities are prioritised, to what degree these are prioritised, and how they relate to each other, as well as whether they result in an overall corporate framing which exemplifies a unique understanding of both companies' responsibilities.

Findings

"Shell helps...". Already on the landing page, Shell introduces the highly salient term "help" which is fundamental to its impression management strategy (see Table 2). The positioning of Shell as a "helping" company is a recurring theme, accompanied by a commitment to the "triple bottom line": "Shell helps to meet the world's growing demand for energy in economically, environmentally and socially responsible ways." The resources of a huge global company ("94,000 employees in more than 70 countries") enable Shell to "help" the world. The "About us" section also includes a first reference

to sustainability, highlighting an “innovative approach to help build a sustainable energy future”. In the “Who we are” section, reference is again made to the “triple bottom line”, enabling Shell to meet the “needs of society”. They are not writing about needs of customers, demands of markets, or expectations of shareholders. Shell’s communicated perspective is society as a whole.

Table 2. *Shell is helping the world*

Start page ¹	<i>“Shell is a global group of energy and petrochemicals companies. With around 94,000 employees in more than 70 countries and territories, Shell helps to meet the world’s growing demand for energy in economically, environmentally and socially responsible ways.”</i>
“About us” ²	<i>“We are a global group of energy and petrochemicals companies with around 94,000 employees in more than 70 countries and territories. We use advanced technologies and take an innovative approach to help build a sustainable energy future.”</i>
“Who we are” ³	<i>“Shell is a global group of energy and petrochemical companies. Our aim is to meet the energy needs of society, in ways that are economically, socially and environmentally viable, now and in the future.”</i>

¹ www.shell.com

² www.shell.com/global/aboutshell.html

³ www.shell.com/global/aboutshell/who-we-are.html

Shell counters critical public perceptions without explicitly referring to them. They do not want to appear to be some kind of global dinosaur, set to squander their future by sticking to outdated fossil energy sources. Instead, the company presents itself as an innovative global group, committed to sustainable energy when helping to meet the future needs of societies. This is what we would define as *inverted positioning*. Instead of avoiding the sustainability discourse by highlighting strengths in other areas, Shell aims to invert critical public perceptions by claiming precisely the opposite.

Vestas’ homepage highlights wind as their “business and passion” (see Table 3). They are proud of their “market-leading position” and their “best-in-class energy solutions”, which then allow them “to set the pace in our industry”. They aim to be the “undisputed wind leader”. The “customers” come first, the “planet” second, this being the only reference in their introductory statement – and a fleeting one at that – to the sustainability discourse. What dominates instead is business language. In their “company profile” section they write about “business case certainty”, “reducing the cost”, “most effective solutions” and the “value chain”. Vestas’ primary reference is the market and the customer, not society as a whole. Vestas frames the world of energy as a competition on global markets with the crucial question: Who is best? The answer: Vestas. A key feature of their business discourse is what Alvesson (2014) has described as rhetoric of “grandiosity”. Vestas bombards the reader with superlatives, in order to exemplify the outstanding economic success story of an ever-expanding company that began in “1898 as a blacksmith shop in western Denmark”.

Another striking feature of Vestas’ business discourse is the underlying instrumental reasoning. Vestas’ “About” section begins with “Making wind work.” It is almost reminiscent of a biblical commandment: “dominion over the earth and subduing the earth” (Genesis 1, Verse 28). Nature is positioned as a resource to be exploited (Pal & Jenkins

Table 3. *Making wind work for Vestas*

Start page ¹	<i>"Wind. It means the world to us. Vestas is the only global energy company dedicated exclusively to wind energy. Wind is our business and our passion. Founded in 1898 as a blacksmith shop in western Denmark, we started producing wind turbines in 1979, and have since gained a market-leading position with more than 71 GW of installed wind power and more than 49 GW under service globally. Today, everyone at Vestas works to ensure that we deliver best-in-class wind energy solutions and set the pace in our industry to the benefit of our customers and our planet. If we continue to do this every day we will be the undisputed global wind leader."</i>
"About" ²	<i>"Making wind work. Together we power the future. For more than 30 years our efforts have been devoted to raising the profile of wind as a mainstream energy source. Wind. It means the world to us. It's a world that will far exceed the predicted 10% of electricity generated by wind by 2020. It's a world where wind's increasingly competitive cost of energy combined with reliable delivery on an industrial and global scale places it securely alongside oil and gas. It's a world populated by far more than the 51,000 turbines we've already installed on behalf of customers in more than 70 countries across six continents."</i>
"Company profile" ³	<i>"Vestas is the only global energy company dedicated exclusively to wind energy - improving business case certainty and reducing the cost of energy for our customers. Vestas works in close partnership with customers to offer the most effective solutions towards energy independence. Our core business is the development, manufacturing, sale and maintenance of wind power plants – with competencies that cover every aspect of the value chain from site studies to service and maintenance."</i>

¹ www.vestas.com

² www.vestas.com/en/about

³ www.vestas.com/en/about/profile

2014). Vestas commodifies wind by highlighting its "competitive cost" and "reliable delivery" to "customers". This is anything but the *competitive positioning* of a CSR brand. They do not highlight wind as green energy with the potential to replace oil and gas. Instead, they want wind to be seen as a "mainstream energy source" placed "securely alongside oil and gas". They do not position themselves as an alternative energy provider making a difference to the environment. Instead, they want to grow in order to become part of the mainstream. Vestas takes the extractive industries as the benchmark for its own development.

Shell also includes elements of a business discourse, as their sections "Our purpose", "Our values", and "Our strategy" indicate (see Table 4). However, these elements are always embedded in a broader framework of social and environmental responsibilities. Shell's purpose is to engage both "responsibly and profitably in oil", while also developing other sources of energy. They want to meet both "customer needs and the world's growing demand for energy". They set the standards both "of performance and ethical behaviors". They claim to be an industry "leader", "while helping to meet global energy demand in a responsible way. Safety, environmental and social responsibility are at the heart of our activities." Again, the role of the responsible "helper" is prioritised over the role of the profitable industry "leader". References to business jargon (leader, profit, performance, customer, etc.) are allowed, but they are never allowed to stand alone. The responsibility discourse is prioritised, and functions as a minder domesticating the language of the market. Shell's value statement fits into this strategy: "honesty, integrity and respect for people". These are very much individual characteristics aimed at personalising and humanising the company.

Table 4. *Shell sets ethical standards*

"Our purpose" ¹	<i>"The objectives of the Shell group are to engage efficiently, responsibly and profitably in oil, oil products, gas, chemicals and other selected businesses and to participate in the search for and development of other sources of energy to meet evolving customer needs and the world's growing demand for energy."</i>
"Our values" ²	<i>"As a global energy company, we set high standards of performance and ethical behaviours. We are judged by how we act - our reputation is upheld by how we live up to our core values honesty, integrity and respect for people. The Shell General Business Principles, Code of Conduct and Code of Ethics help everyone at Shell act in line with these values and comply with all relevant legislation and regulations."</i>
"Our strategy" ³	<i>"Our strategy seeks to reinforce our position as a leader in the oil and gas industry while helping to meet global energy demand in a responsible way. Safety, environmental and social responsibility are at the heart of our activities."</i>

¹ www.shell.com/global/aboutshell/who-we-are/our-purpose.html

² www.shell.com/global/aboutshell/who-we-are/our-values.html

³ www.shell.com/global/aboutshell/our-strategy.html

Vestas' "Vision", "Mission", their "Values", and "Corporate strategy" set different priorities (see Table 5). Leadership rhetoric is far more salient: Vestas wants to be the "undisputed wind leader", the "strongest brand in the industry", they "set the pace" with "faster operations than our competitors". The corporate context is once more portrayed as a global business race, with Vestas confident that they will be the winners in the end. This is their overall framing supported by the rhetoric of grandiosity and business jargon: "in class margins", "customers", "quality", "operations", "growth", "turnaround", "strategic objectives", "control", "flexibly". Further, they list three corporate values that seem strangely anaemic: "Accountability", "Collaboration", and "Simplicity". Contrary to Shell, which presents itself as an organisation with a human face, Vestas' value statement appears somewhat aseptic, as if they were unsure what they ought to talk about where values are concerned.

There are only a few references pointing beyond the scope of the market. Vestas claims to benefit "our customers and our planet". Like Shell, they make use of a rhetorical figure that links economic responsibilities with environmental responsibilities. However, this is not integrative but additive, and the blunt headline for their "strategy" makes clear where the priorities lie: "Profitable Growth for Vestas". Once more, nature is positioned as a resource, revealing an instrumental approach towards the environment: Vestas' vision is "solely committed to harvesting the potential wind holds". They want to bring "wind on par with oil and gas". The company does not present itself as an alternative energy provider, but instead bases its actions on the benchmark set by the extractive industries.

Lastly, we look at the statements supposed to directly account for responsibilities beyond the market: Shell on "Environment & Society" (see Table 6) and Vestas on "Sustainability" (see Table 7). In line with its personalised value statement, Shell refers to "daily life" and communities when exemplifying its commitment to "Environment & Society". Sustainability is not positioned as an ambition, but as a current achievement: "To help meet tomorrow's energy needs, Shell is working responsibly today. Our approach to sustainability starts with running a safe, efficient, responsible and profitable

Table 5. *Vestas is better, faster, stronger*

"Vision" ¹	<i>"To be the undisputed global wind leader Since Vestas was established in 1979, we have been solely committed to harvesting the potential wind holds for our planet's energy supply, which has made us the market leader within wind with more than 71 GW installed to date. We intend to continue down the path of 100% dedication to wind, and in order to fulfil our vision we want to have the strongest brand in the industry, have best in class margins, be the market leader measured by volume and bring wind on par with coal and gas."</i>
"Mission" ²	<i>"We deliver best-in-class wind energy solutions and set the pace in our industry to the benefit of our customers and our planet. Our mission statement captures our business and our commitment to our customers' objectives and the well-being of our planet. It highlights the quality of our wind energy solutions and how we set the pace in the industry through leadership and faster operations than our competitors."</i>
"Values" ³	Accountability Acknowledge your responsibility and remain accountable for everything you do – including when you make a mistake. Collaboration Collaborate across all functions to share knowledge and reduce complexity. Simplicity Don't overcomplicate your tasks but apply simplicity and grasp opportunities without ever jeopardising safety or quality."
"Corporate Strategy" ⁴	<i>"Vestas' new corporate strategy 'Profitable Growth for Vestas' builds on the solid foundation of the successfully completed two-year turnaround and outlines the strategic objectives and initiatives for the mid-term (3-5 years) which will take Vestas steps closer to the realization of the vision. The turnaround has created a strong foundation for future growth, enabling Vestas to control the things we can control and to react flexibly to those we can't."</i>

¹ www.vestas.com/en/about/profile#!vision

² www.vestas.com/en/about/profile#!mission

³ www.vestas.com/en/about/profile#!values

⁴ www.vestas.com/en/about/profile#!strategy

business." Profitability is the last term listed and is merely a means to a higher end: Shell can only help the world if it is profitable. As with Vestas, the rhetoric of a mean-end-relationship indicates an instrumental reasoning and a resource-based view of strategy (Sillince 2006). However, Vestas perceives nature as an exploitable resource, whereas Shell describes a sustainable energy future as the higher end, with profit maximisation appearing as the necessary evil on the path to achieving the ultimate goal, which is to help the planet.

Table 6. *Shell is responsible today*

"Environment & Society" ¹	<i>"Energy is vital to daily life – it keeps our world moving and provides access to essentials like clean water, food and health care. Over the coming decades, populations and living standards for many will rise – and so will the need for energy. To help meet tomorrow's energy needs, Shell is working responsibly today. Our approach to sustainability starts with running a safe, efficient, responsible and profitable business. We also work to share benefits with the communities where we operate. And we're helping to shape a more sustainable energy future, by investing in low-carbon technologies and collaborating with others on global energy challenges."</i>
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¹ www.shell.com/global/environment-society.html

Table 7. *Vestas serves developed societies*

"Sustainability" ¹	<p><i>"Powering sustainability The use of energy is growing rapidly and the resources of our planet are already under great pressure. We need to change the way we produce our energy. We need to produce more renewable energy, and the most promising source of energy is the power of wind. At Vestas, we believe energy to be an important catalyst for founding a better quality of life. A stable energy supply is an essential part of the infrastructure for a developed society. Energy is central to nearly every major challenge and opportunity the world faces today. Be it jobs, security, climate change or food production - access to sustainable energy is essential for strengthening economies, protecting ecosystems, reducing poverty and achieving equity."</i></p>
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¹ www.vestas.com/en/about/sustainability

In contrast, Vestas' understanding of sustainability is very much coloured by its dynamic growth and grandiosity rhetoric: "Powering sustainability." They associate sustainability less with ideas of system endurance, protection, resilience, or stability. Instead, terms like "power", "pressure", "rapidly", "change", and "growth" illustrate the restless nature of the business discourse. The "capitalist progress myth" (Ihlen 2011: 150) is not revised but promoted: more consumption ("use of energy is growing rapidly") requires more production ("need to produce more renewable energy"). Saving energy is not on their agenda; their business model is firmly based on the energy hunger of the "developed society": "Be it jobs, security, climate change or food production – access to sustainable energy is essential for strengthening economies, protecting ecosystems, reducing poverty and achieving equity." In both listings, business-related ambitions come first: "jobs" and "strengthening economies". Even "equity" as the final term is still business jargon, and one is left wondering why they did not choose "justice" or "equality" instead. Overall, Vestas subordinates sustainability to the hyperactive growth ideology of the market, while Shell frames its responsibilities on "Environment & Society" as their ultimate corporate driver aiming to enhance people's life worlds.

Conclusions

Our study analysed the way in which two companies from the energy sector communicate corporate responsibilities on their websites. Both companies need to respond to different perceptions; while Shell is acknowledged to be a profitable company, as a representative of the oil industry it has been criticised for a lack of social and environmental responsibility. Vestas, meanwhile, is a representative of the wind industry and has the potential of a CSR brand, but its economic performance has been called into question. The results show that the responsibility communications of Shell and Vestas are indeed very different, but in a way that might come as a surprise. It is not the case that both companies follow the logic of *competitive positioning* by highlighting perceived *competitive advantages*. Shell does not focus on its economic responsibility, and Vestas does not focus on its social and environmental responsibility. On the contrary, both engage in *inverted positioning*. Shell aims to *invert* public perceptions by a pervasive communication of social and environmental responsibilities, whereas Vestas downplays precisely these responsibilities. They aim to invert public perceptions by highlighting economic responsibilities.

Thus, the same strategy – inverted positioning – results in markedly different self-presentations. Shell constructs the image of an innovative *helper* serving the energy needs of the world in a sustainable and responsible manner. The company shows a human face and an understanding of the concerns of common people. Even though the sustainability discourse is highly salient on their website, Shell also takes account of economic responsibilities. However, profitability as a corporate goal is domesticated and subordinated to social and environmental responsibilities, which are presented as the primary corporate commitment.

Vestas' self-presentation is instead displayed through highly salient and obtrusive business jargon. They *brownwash* their image by constituting themselves as powerful leaders succeeding on a competitive market due to their outstanding customer service. Their promotional rhetoric of economic grandiosity goes hand in hand with an instrumental approach to nature: the wind is positioned as a resource that needs to be exploited. Vestas is committed to a traditional growth paradigm where the response to greater consumption of energy must be increased production. References to a sustainability discourse are marginal. The company does not define itself as a sustainable alternative to oil. Quite the contrary, the strong market position of the oil industry is used as a valued benchmark. Instead of highlighting perceived strengths as a potential CSR brand, they focus on economic responsibilities.

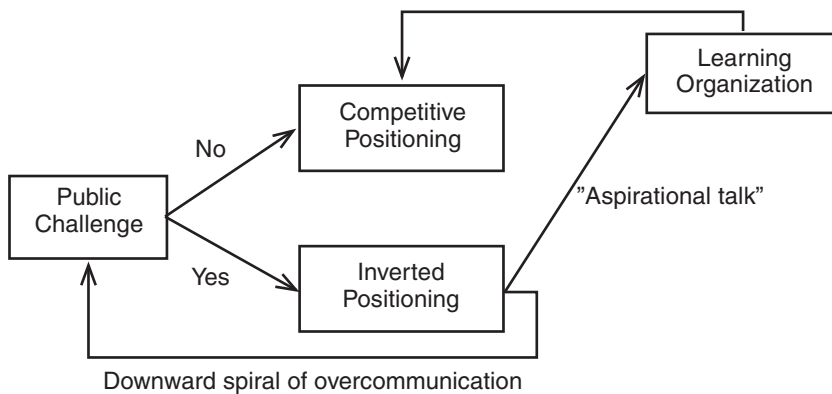
Overall, Shell insists on contested social and environmental responsibilities while marginalising economic responsibilities. Vestas insists on contested economic responsibilities while marginalising social and environmental responsibilities. Both *invert* differing public perceptions, and in consequence, the same type of positioning results in different corporate messages: Shell takes care of sustainable oil, while Vestas exploits profitable wind.

Theoretical implications

How can we make sense of *inverted positioning* in theoretical terms? A critical perspective could demand its deconstruction: “Managers must say they are responsible, because they are not.” (Cheit 1971: 372) This assumption would allow responsibility *communication* to be taken as a perfect empirical indicator for the responsibility of corporate *practices*. One need only apply a reversed sign: a company that highlights its CSR involuntarily lets us know that they are not socially and environmentally responsible; a company that highlights its outstanding economic performance on competitive markets involuntarily lets us know that it must be in serious financial difficulties. While such an interpretation of *inverted positioning* is not without charm, its normative claim is inherently positivistic: Corporate communications – what they say – should be consistent with corporate practices – what they do. Communication is conceptualised as a corporate conduit (Axley 1984) and results in a paradigmatic ‘talk’ versus ‘action’ distinction. It is a paradigm that deconstructionist CSR research (e.g., Aras & Crowther 2009; Fougère & Solitander 2009; Slack 2012) actually shares with the functionalist business discourse on CSR (e.g., Basil & Erlandson 2008; Preuss 2015; Waddock & Googins 2011; Wagner, Lutz & Weitz 2009; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli & Schwarz 2006). However, such a theoretical positioning expects the impossible of empirical research, requiring the identification of practices *beyond* communication (Boje, Gardner & Smith 2006).

Instead, we would follow a paradigm that conceptualises communication *as* social practice: *Communication Constitutes Organisations* (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren 2009; Taylor & van Every 2000). It is increasingly used as a foundation for a third way of CSR thinking beyond positivistic functionalism and traditional critical perspectives (Christensen & Cheney 2011; Schoeneborn & Trittin 2013). We did not choose Shell and Vestas for our case study because one company is profitable and the other sustainable *as a matter of fact*. Instead, our starting point was the different public perceptions about social, environmental, and economic responsibilities. Thus, we interpret corporate communications as a response to public communications, but not as a more or less appropriate mirror of some kind of external reality beyond communication. In consequence, we define *inverted positioning* as a theoretical element within a *communication process model* (see Figure 1). The communication process takes its starting point from the public image of a company as perceived by the corporation. The response is a strategic choice between *competitive* and *inverted positioning*. We hypothesise that *inverted positioning* will be the preferred choice, if the company assumes significant critical perceptions on at least one relevant dimension of responsibilities. They will highlight social and environmental sustainability if they are criticised on account of a lack of these responsibilities, and are likely to highlight profitability and competitiveness if they observe speculation regarding their economic responsibility.

Figure 1. Integrating inverted positioning into a communication process model



So, what might the consequence of inverted positioning be? We assume two possibilities – either a reputational “downward spiral” (Hambrick & D’Aveni 1988) or “aspirational talk” (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen 2013) facilitating organisational learning processes (Huzzard & Östergren 2002). A corporate “downward spiral” has been conceptualised by March (2007) as “Ibsen dilemma” and by Ashforth & Gibbs (1990) as a vicious circle induced by an “overacting actor”. Shell and Vestas would be such actors, because they “overstate claims to legitimacy” (p. 177). The more they produce “ideal-satisfying fantasies” (March 2007: 1283) as part of their *inverted positioning* strategy, “the more resolute and vigorous become the guardians of ideals in enforcing them” (p. 1282). Jones & Pittman (1982) explain these processes with the aid of a “self-promoters’ paradox” (p. 243); empirical research based on attribution theory points out that highly salient self-promotional communication decreases the credibility of corporate messages

(Sjovall & Talk 2004; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli & Schwarz 2006). Critical stakeholders may then become even more aggressive, as inverted positioning fuels a vicious cycle that ultimately results in grotesque corporate communication strategies, with a company like Shell presenting itself as a kind of global charity.

A more optimistic theoretical perspective has been offered by Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen (2013) who introduced the concept of “aspirational talk” in order to better understand perceived gaps between talk and action. They argue from a CCO perspective that these gaps do not necessarily indicate organisational hypocrisy or decoupling processes. “Aspirational talk” in the field of CSR should not be measured against real corporate practices; instead, it should be valued as a self-committing ambition for the future. The more companies publicly talk about contested responsibilities, the greater pressure they come under to comply with such responsibilities. Even if CSR communication starts with the intention of pure “window dressing”, “greenwashing” or “brownwashing”, the constitutive and performative character of communication could gradually induce learning processes, where in the end managers align with their claims (Livesey & Graham 2007). In other words, corporate responsibilities can be talked into existence. So, instead of criticising the over-communication observed in the case of both Shell and Vestas, we ought to carefully investigate the degree to which their *inverted positioning* might support “aspirational talk” with the potential to induce substantial organisational improvements (Livesey 2002). If these changes are appreciated by the public in the long run, the company could switch from an *inverted* to a *competitive positioning* by highlighting strengths which have in the past been perceived to be weaknesses.

Limitations and future research

Both the “downward spiral” and the “aspirational talk” option help to integrate *inverted positioning* into a theoretical model that builds on a constitutive understanding of communication as a process over time. It is not necessary to believe in one of the options and skip the other. Instead, both are empirical possibilities. Future research could investigate the conditions under which *inverted positioning* results in a reputational “downward spiral” or when companies are able to successfully utilise the constitutive potential of “aspirational talk”. This requires longitudinal studies, which could also take account of changes in public opinion, and explore the predictive potential of the proposed communication model. The wind industry, for example, is increasingly facing activism and local resistance to wind turbine projects (Borch, n.D.). Moreover, Vestas is embroiled in a number of corporate fraud cases (Hansen 2015). Our model of *inverted positioning* would predict that this will affect the responsibility communication of the company beyond rapid responses as part of their crisis communication. Research suggests a significant time lag between the recognition of changes in the organisational environment and the amendment of strategies (Barr, Stimpert & Huff 1992; Rindova & Fombrun 1999). It could well be the case that in the medium-term, Vestas presents itself as a frontrunner against corporate corruption and as an advocate of local communities. Then it would again be up to empirical research to assess whether their new *inverted positioning* strategy contributes to a communicative “downward spiral” or to “aspirational talk”, enabling the company to take a turn for the better.

Future research could also tackle the limitations of our contrasting research design. We do not claim that findings from a qualitative comparative case study can be generalised. Shell and Vestas are not typical cases. Instead, we positioned them as extreme cases. They come close to what Max Weber (1904/2012) has conceptualised as a theoretical ideal type. An ideal type “is not the description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description” (p. 273). It is an amplified, pure idea about the underpinnings of “muddled” empirical phenomena. Likewise, extreme cases allow the development of an analytical order which contributes to a better understanding of empirical communication processes. Thus, Shell and Vestas as non-representative cases reveal fundamental logics of corporate responsibility communication. Accordingly, our in-depth analysis of extreme self-descriptions could form the starting point for qualitative follow-up studies of rather “muddled” communication practices, and for quantitative path analyses that would systematically include intervening variables in a process-orientated perspective.

Furthermore, the public visibility of organisations and the public character of communication processes deserve additional attention (Castelo Branco & Rodrigues 2006). Shell and Vestas are among the largest companies in their respective industry sectors, but Shell is certainly subject to greater public scrutiny than Vestas (Ihlen 2011; Vertigans 2013). On the one hand, a moralising public sphere could push a company like Shell even further in the direction of CSR over-communication practices (Eisenegger & Imhof 2008). On the other hand, Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen (2013) assume that “aspirational talk” has more potential to be performative when it is carried out in public. Overall, blurring lines or (de)coupling processes between public and non-public responsibility communications are key research questions that deserve greater theoretical reflection and empirical exploration.

Finally, we want to raise the question of whether a theory of corporate responsibility communication should also leave room for a third type of corporate response: *reflexive positioning*. Both *competitive* and *inverted positioning* result from highly selective strategic communication processes that do not account for the complexities, ambivalences, inconsistencies, dilemmas, and paradoxes of polyphonic organisations (Brunsson 2003; Wehmeier & Schultz 2011). Even “aspirational talk” is not reflexive, as long as responsibilities are communicated as practices that have already been realised and not as ideals towards which the company might gradually advance, without ever being able to achieve. *Reflexive positioning* would instead be aware of and deliberately communicate strategic dilemmas and organisational shortcomings. Ultimately, this would necessitate the discarding of a fundamental business paradigm: the manageability of corporate life.

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